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AN INTERVIEW WITH JOAN JETT

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JOAN JETT

Still Notorious After All These Years

By Danny McCue

To listen to Joan Jett is to be convinced rock and roll springs eternal.

Having turned 31 a month ago, she's been making records, touring, and flying in the face of those who think rock should be a male-dominated game, for more than half her life. And yet, after 19 albums (including those she made with the Runaways and Runaways' compilations), her belief in all the things that give this music its mythic connotations remains unshaken.

On *Notorious*, her latest Epic Records release, Jett and longtime partners the Blackhearts (guitarist Ricky Byrd and drummer Thommy Price) eschew cover tunes (long a staple of the band's recorded repertoire) for ten powerchord-driven original songs that, though none qualify as anthems in the vein of "I Love Rock and Roll" or the Grammy-nominated "I Hate Myself For Loving You," stand among the best performances she's ever committed to disc.

In fact, they're the kind of performances that have caused some writers, notably *The Daily News*' Jim Farber, to start assessing her as an important and historical figure in her own right. *Esquire* magazine even went so far as to print the lyrics of "Machismo," a track on *Notorious*, in their recent State of Masculinity issue.

The first single from the album, written with the Replacements' Paul Westerberg, is called "Backlash."

Did you have a very specific purpose in mind when you went into the studio this time?

We didn't want to do any cover songs. That was definite. And I think that was really because we had just come off of *The Hit List*, which was all covers, plus covers now seem like the standard thing to do for a lot of bands. Earlier in my career it was a little bit different from what everybody else did.

And we definitely wanted the album to be... we always want the album to be raw, but we wanted to keep certain songs very dry and very... soulful. I can't really explain it, but I know what I mean. I didn't want a lot of sweetening.

Aside from not doing covers, are there other reasons why you personally wrote more of the album than you usually do? Is writing becoming easier?

No, it's not really [a case] of it becoming easier. I think if you want to be totally logical and Virgo about it, it's because, I guess, [laughs] I'm in the band. I should be writing the songs and the lyrics, and with this album it's just a matter of the timing working out perfectly, plus we had a long time to write it. The last original record we did was *Up Your Alley*, back in 1988, so we've really had this whole period of time to work on these songs; "Don't Surrender" and some of the others were started [way] back then.

Were you recording as you went along, or did you wait until all the songs were done and then go into the studio?

It was all pretty much done earlier this year, from January through May.

So how do you approach making a record?

It can work in different ways, depending on the song and how well the band knows it. Some of these songs, like I said, were written earlier, and we had worked on them and done them live: "Don't Surrender" we've done live; "Backlash" we've done live; "Ashes In The Wind" has been around awhile... whereas a song like "Machismo" was finished in the studio. I had the music written and the idea and some of the lyrics, but that really didn't come together until shortly before we recorded it. "The Only Good Thing (You Ever Said Was Goodbye)" was written [earlier], but we didn't have a chance to work on it until we decided it was going to be on the album. And with those it's a little different approach because nobody knew what parts they were going to play. It wasn't like we had gone through it and it was second nature.

Using "The Only Good Thing... " as the example, could you describe how a song comes together in the studio, brick by brick?

As far as I can remember, Desmond Child and I had written the song and taped it, and from there we just gathered everybody around, I picked up my guitar, and I started playing the song from the top; just to show them how the song went, and as I played the riff into the verse, Thommy Price started banging on his drum and feeling out what he thought he should do. So it was a matter of each of us joining in, just sort of walking through the song for the first time. Then we tried it another time at full volume. We went through it a couple of times, because I can't concentrate on the vocal until we all learn it.

So it's no different from going into a rehearsal studio and preparing for a tour?

Yeah, basically. It's not that you're doing anything differently, you're just further along [in the process] when you go in to record a song you've been doing live: you're set in the rhythm and you know the little idiosyncrasies, such as what the drum fills are... Thommy's got his stuff down, I've got my rhythm riffs down... but with a song that's brand new to the band, I have a chance to explore. I don't necessarily have to play something that makes it easier for me to sing. It makes me experiment more with my playing.

Have you ever started experimenting with a song and had the finished product be much different than you originally conceived it?

Different than I'd thought they'd be? Wow... you'd really have to give me an example. Really I just push it and see where it goes, see what feels comfortable. Do

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you mean in terms of a guitar part or...

Actually I'm thinking more in terms of how the band's input causes your songs to evolve.

Where you can really tell is when you have a song that you're not quite sure is good enough. Sometimes when the band plays it, that's a yes or no right there. That can make or break a song. It's a matter of whether the band really feels comfortable playing it or of your saying, 'Wait a minute, what is this we're doing? Maybe we should think about this again.'

When it comes time to commit to putting a song on an album or not, what's the most important criteria by which you judge it: the songwriting or the intensity of the performance?

I think everything is important. You've got to have a good song, obviously. It's got to say something that you want to say. It's got to, hopefully, be catchy... and, for me, it has to have something very primitive about it. In rock and roll I hear something very primitive that makes me want to move... so it has to sort of stir those animalistic emotions, but the performance has to be great too. I spent a lot of time on this album doing my vocals and redoing them, making sure I was really happy with everything I had sung. That's something I've been working on a lot lately, because there have been times when I think I could've done things a little better or, you know, emoted a little differently.

Also, because we've just come off a long tour, I've been doing a lot of vocal exercises, just to keep my voice strong on the road. When you're doing six nights a week for eight months, that can be tough on your throat, and so I've been doing a lot of vocal exercises — even though they sound hideous. It's pretty scary to listen to, and pretty embarrassing to do, to tell you the truth, but it really works, and as a result my voice felt really strong in the studio and I really had fun. On something like "Goodbye," for instance, there's a wide range of notes in that chorus, running from very high to really low, and I take pride in the fact that I was able to handle it. That's a vocal I'm proud of.

Aside from that performance, how do you judge your growth as a creative artist?

How do I measure my growth? Boy, that's sort of hard to put your finger on. You just have to be happy with what you're doing. I don't even know if I'm growing. I'm basically doing the same thing I was doing when I was sixteen, you know what I mean? Writing songs from my emotions, writing real things that I hope other people can relate to. I mean, it's not like you measure and say, 'Oh, I played my guitar better this time than last time,' or anything like that; you just hope that you always live up to the same standards that you set before, which means making honest music and expressing what you feel. And just do the best job that you can at that time. It's not like I try to see if I'm getting better or if my songwriting's getting better — I can't really tell, and to tell you the truth, who's ever to say whether you're getting better or not. It's all just a matter of opinion.

How has aging — I hate to put it that way — affected your work? I mean, you started doing this when you were 15 and you just recently turned 31. Does age affect the rock and roll star?

Well, I'll tell you, when you realize that age is one of those things that has, unfortunately, been pounded into our heads and it's a mental thing, then as long as you're in decent shape, 'aging' really isn't that big a deal. Mentally I don't feel [begins to laugh], and I've got lots of people who can vouch for this, I really feel no different than I felt when I was in the Runaways and living in Hollywood. I mean, I'm sure I was a lot more naive, but as far as the actual emotions that I feel, it's pretty much the same. I still have those initial, crazy thoughts that you have when you're sixteen, but sometimes now I'll sit back and let the crazy thoughts go by and really think about, whatever it is I'm thinking about, a little more than I would've at sixteen. When I was younger I would've gone out and acted on it, whatever it was. Sometimes I think I'm a little more introspective, but I don't know if that's an age thing, or grows out of the fact that I've been doing [this] awhile.

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You've written a number of the songs on Notorious *with Desmond Child, one of your longtime collaborators. What does he bring out of you as a writer?*

He makes me not settle for the easy [answer]. He pushes me to keep making the lyrics better than we left them the day before. It's not something that's spoken about when we work, it's very similar to anybody else that I write with: we sit down, and I've got... whatever, ideas for songs and several riffs. I usually bring tapes and stuff, and I play them and tell him my ideas, and he usually has a few, and we sort of put them together as a puzzle. But yeah, he doesn't let me settle for the easy out, and I don't know how to explain what I mean... sometimes if I like what I hear it's like 'ok, don't fix it and don't try to even look any further.' Desmond makes me look further.

Over the years a number of artists have told me that when they finish an album, they always feel there's something left to explore, an aspect of their art that they haven't quite conquered. Do you feel that?

Musically? Wow, that's hard to say. That's like one of those really intellectual kind of questions [laughs]. I guess you always figure that there's somewhere else to go. There's always another ten great songs — could you rephrase that and give me a concrete example?

Sure, about a year ago I talked to Paul Westerberg and posed roughly the same question, and he said that he had never really listened to lyrics before [he started writing the Replacements' All Shook Down*], and that it's only recently that he started to explore that aspect of his writing...*

To that I say, 'Paul, you're out of your mind. Go listen to *Let It Be*,' which is a Replacements' record that I think is just outrageous lyrically. I mean, if he wasn't listening, then he was just guided by some inner thing — that's a heavy record. It's funny how artists look at their thing differently. In my case I think lyrics are probably the key; musically I'm pretty happy, but I think lyrically you always want to say something deeper and better than you've said it before. That's what I want to do, but I don't think I'll ever get there, because [as an artist] you can't control emotions or creative output — you don't know when it's going to come or where it's going to come. It's one of those intangibles.

How did you come to write "Backlash" with Paul Westerberg?

Really just being a big fan of, actually, the record I just mentioned. I thought it was such a great record and I've been a Replacements fan for years and I thought it would be great to write a song with him. And really, it was just as easy as calling him up and asking him if he wanted to write. I told him I had a couple of ideas for the song, and a title, and would he like to do it? And he said, 'yeah.' We then got together in Phoenix, Arizona, where he was doing some promo for their last album, and he had some days off, so I met him there and we wrote it.

What do you do when the songs just won't come?

And you want to make them come? I find the best thing is just to sit and strum my guitar. And if nothing comes, it doesn't come. I force myself to play simple chords, often the same old three chords that I've played forever, and I just wait. And what I've discovered is, when you least expect it, a melody line or something will come and let you know that everything's not gone. So you think, OK, there's something. I didn't die. And as far as lyrics go, I just make everything apply to my life. It's such a simple thing, but to explain it is very difficult. It never sounds the way it should.

Why'd you include "Wait For Me" on this album?

Why not? [laughs mischeviously] I've always liked to do Runaways songs, this one particularly because I wrote it, and also, I think the Runaways' music didn't get enough exposure, so in a weird way it's me paying homage to my own band. But at the same time, it's still a very relevant song in my life, so I thought it was pretty cool to do.

How did the lyrics of "Machismo" wind up in Esquire *magazine?*

They were doing this issue on the state of masculinity and wanted to know if I would write something for it, and we had just written "Machismo," so I thought, 'why not just send them the lyrics?' That would be the best way I could write an essay about it. So it was as simple as that. I don't know why they wanted me. It was a pretty wild bunch of other women who they asked to contribute; you wouldn't expect to see me in there with them.

I don't know if you've ever articulated this in so many words before, but do you consider yourself a part of the feminist movement?

Not in a sign carrying sense. I never felt I needed a sign, but in the sense that women are equal, most certainly. I mean, as far back as the Runaways, that was my thing, 'if the guys can do it... what about getting five girls to do it?' There was never a question in my mind that women were equal. So I guess I am a feminist in a subliminal sense. I'm not waving a sign though. I don't find it necessary.

OK, and now a question on a completely different matter. What is it about Long Island that makes you continue to call it home?

What do I like about it? Wow, you threw me a curveball there. Not that there's a lot to like about it. It's beautiful. It's green, sort of [laughs]. I don't know. I'm comfortable here. I find no need to move. Where am I going to go? I've lived in California in my life and I don't necessarily want to move back there. I've become a New Yorker. I've lived here since 1980 and I'm happy here. So why leave?

Last question. Do you think critics and fans appreciate what you do for the same reason that you appreciate what you do?

Wow. I don't think critics do. Critics don't ever see things the same way the fans see them, even if they want to. I think to a certain extent the people know what you go through. But I don't think they understand the complete loss of privacy — and most people say, 'Well f*ck you, you asked for it. You're in a band.' Yeah, I did, so I can't really complain about it, but that doesn't make it any easier. Yeah, I know I asked for it, and hey, I can deal with it because I like talking to people. I really truly do. So it doesn't bother me as much as it might bother the next person. I like to sit around and shoot the shit with fans. It doesn't bother me. But there is a point where you just want to go, 'Oh man, I want to go sit down and watch TV and not do anything.' And people don't quite realize that. But hey, that's totally cool, because they love you for what you're doing. Sometimes I don't know if they realize how hard you're working, but I think they get an idea. ◇

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